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ABSTRACT

This portrait of a high school literature classroom is one of a series of several such portraits which depict diverse classroom settings of high school literature, and which result from the second year of a teacher-research project in the greater Albany, New York area. This article portrays teacher Mr. McCabe and his eighth grade class in their unit on classical myths. It notes the rhythm to Mr. McCabe's classes, consisting of three parts: housekeeping, exhortation, and myth-telling. The report describes how Mr. McCabe dramatically retells the myths in eighth-grade idiom, inserting little homilies and dressing them up with humor for the consumption of the students in front of him, and how he holds the complete attention and cooperation of his class. The article notes that change and resistance to change are key issues for this middle school. (SR)

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The Mythmaker of Seneca

Doris M. Quick

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The Mythmaker of Seneca

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Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature

The Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature is a research and development center located at the University at Albany, State University of New York. The Center was established in 1987 with funds from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, and from the National Endowment for the Arts. The Center's mission is to improve the teaching of content knowledge and critical-thinking strategies that contribute to literary understanding, particularly at the middle and high school levels.

Center-sponsored research falls into three broad areas: 1) surveys of current practice in the teaching of literature, including studies of both what is taught and how it is taught; 2) studies of alternative approaches to instruction and their effects on students' knowledge of literature and critical-thinking abilities; and 3) studies of alternative approaches to the assessment of literature achievement, including both classroom-based and larger-scale approaches to testing.

The Center also promotes good practice in the teaching of literature through conferences and seminars, through the development of computerised bibliographies on research and practice in the teaching of literature, and through publications that present the Center's own research and provide other resources for research and practice. To receive a list of current publications, please write to CLTL, School of Education, University at Albany, 1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, NY 12222.

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Preface

Reading Teacher's Stories

The following portrait of high school literature classrooms results from the second year of a teacher-research project, sponsored by the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature, concerned with depicting diverse classroom settings of high school literature instruction. Last year's report, "Teaching Literature in High School: A Teacher-Research Project" (Report Series 2.2, April, 1989) offered extensive detail about the goals and methods of our work, along with an explanation of the philosophical assumptions associated with it. We refer interested readers to that essay, and to the teacher narratives that it introduces, all available from the Center, for a fuller understanding of what we will summarize only cursorily here. The narratives that have been produced this year are all new, though the activities that have led to their production are identical to those of the previous year. The high school teachers who have graciously, indeed we might say bravely, offered us glimpses of their classrooms are also new to the project, representing a range of urban and suburban, honors and average, literature programs from the greater Albany, New York area. These teachers are identified in the stories by pseudonyms. Several of the teacher-researchers engaged in last year's work have continued with the research group. They include Ann Connolly of Bethlehem Central High School, Carol Forman-Pemberton of Burnt Hills/Ballston Lake, Tricia Hansbury-Zuendt of Canajoharie, and Doris Quick, recently retired from Burnt Hills and now teaching at Union College. In addition, two new researchers have joined the group, Susan Burke of Guilderland Schools, and John Danaher, who teaches at Shaker High School in North Colonie.

A growing body of theory and scholarship is devoted to legitimizing the concept and practice of teacher inquiry, so that its integrity as a mode of investigation no longer requires elaborate defense. More important, growing numbers of teachers are adding to the stock of formal knowledge about classroom life in such collections as Reclaiming the Classroom: Teacher Research as an Agency for Change, eds., Dixie Goswami and Peter Stillman (Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton, 1987) and Seeing for Ourselves: Case Study Research by Teachers of Writing, eds., Glenda Bissex and Richard Bullock (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987). As a result, the substantiveness of teacher knowledge, whether in the form of "case study" or that of classroom "story," is no longer hypothetical but is open to view in the public record. While there are differences of opinion among its advocates about the technical means of teacher inquiry, there is broad agreement that teachers have distinctive vantage points on what happens in classrooms, quite separate from those of educational researchers, leading them to a concrete, "phenomenal" understanding of school life that deserves to be regarded as authentic "knowledge," not just subjective impression or idiosyncratic anecdote. Their knowledge is that of the insider, whose "felt sense" of the school world, expressed typically in the form of narrative reflection, stands to enrich our sense of classroom life.

We have argued in general terms, as others have, for the usefulness of teacher stories, their value in enhancing teachers' reflectiveness about their instructional practices and settings, both in last year's research report and elsewhere (cf. "Knowing Our Language: A

Phenomenological Basis for Teacher Research," in Audits of Meaning: A Festschrift for Ann E. Berthoff, ed., Louise Z. Smith, Portsmouth, NH: Boynton; Heinemann, 1988). It remains here for readers to see for themselves the kind and quality of learning that stories make available, remembering that there are important differences between the sort of knowledge that comes from stories and that available from the discursive prose of conventional educational research. Stories depict and dramatize the life-world. They evoke; they do not assert. They are immersed in the particularity of actual experience, aiming at richness of event rather then simplicity or conciseness of statement. Stories do not, cannot, insist on their readings; instead, they bring their readers into the act of construing meaning. Themes emerge for attentive readers, and they have the effect of proposing a coherence for the text; but two readers will not always compose the same themes. Moreover, no thematic judgment will permanently reduce the complexity of the story itself: it is reread for new insights, altered meanings. Stories endlessly modify other stories; readings endlessly modify other readings.

Whatever individual readers see in these stories is something to share with others who may well have learned something else or more from the same texts. The value of the stories lies finally in the fact that they offer a context for conversation among teachers. The fuller that conversation, the more stories available to sustain it, the greater the gain in a qualitatively improved awareness of the meaningfulness of classroom life. By reproducing the life-world of school teaching and learning apart from the immediacy of teachers' actual engagement in that world, classroom narratives create the tranquil, objectified conditions needed for reflection while still retaining teachers' intuitive recognition of the complexities of their experience. Stories don't tell teachers what to do; they simply portray people doing, and also thinking and feeling. Watching others in action, readers also see themselves. Discovering personally meaningful themes in the stories, readers find coherence and support for their own professional work.

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The Mythmaker of Seneca

Doris M. Quick
Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake High School

Gentle breezes waft in the five big old-fashioned windows that stretch from almost the ceiling to almost the floor of this eighth-grade classroom in a small city in upstate New York. Sun spills in the windows too and reflects off the shiny, well-kept floors. Outside children's cheerful voices raise shouts from the school playground as they enjoy noon recess under the watchful eye of the principal. Inside, 19 eighth-grade students of "average" ability: eleven male, eight female, three black, who are here immediately after lunch period, sit in six rows of six chairs each facing the teacher who is pacing from side to side in front of the room. He is tall, well over six feet, with an arm span that seems suitable to a basketball player. Today he is wearing a cardigan sweater and neat slacks with shirt and tie. He gestures, he grimaces, he assumes voices, he takes the roles of the characters as he tells these students his interpretation of the story of Priam and the birth of Paris.

> The guy who is in charge now is named Priam. What's been happening in the last few generations?

A student in the row next to the windows provides the answer Mr. McCabe is looking for. He continues.

> So they had genetic heart attacks at 19, 20, 21, 22, and now it is down to Priam. What were the two vows that the King, the Trojan King, had to make above and beyond anything he had to do?

The same student offers the suggestion that he had to provide protection for the city and sons for the future.

> Right. By now he is getting old by Trojan standards, in his late twenties. But he was sick.

All student eyes are either on the teacher or the notebooks open in front of them. The students take notes as some important fact strikes them, but all attentively write when Mr. McCabe says, "Finally, after a number of years of nonmarriage. That's the term you want to put in your notes: nonmarriage. Because they weren't really married."

Mr. McCabe breaks out of character and addresses the audience directly, making eye contact with students and with me. His voice now reminds me of a stand-up comic I may have heard on late-night television. "Remember they were brother and sister. You can't understand. You say, 'My God! I'm marrying my sister? I can't stand her!'"

Mr. McCabe does not use a notecard nor does he miss a syllable in his story of how Paris was born, how he received a prophecy at birth that he would be responsible for the destruction of Troy, how Priam tried to have his son Paris killed by a woodcutter. Now he assumes the voice of the narrator/stage manager.

The woodcutter doesn't want to do this. He sharpens the ax, his hands are shaking, sweaty, he's getting nervous. Suddenly he realizes the only thing he can do is just do it! He spits on his hands. He grabs the ax.

Here Mr. McCabe turns sideways to the audience and mimes the woodcutter's motions. As he brings the invisible ax down with great force, he continues.

His hands are shaking so violently that he regrabs it and reaches over and begins to bring the ax handle down. And the baby moves. The blanket opens and the burning blue eyes of the child pierce his heart and he brings the ax handle down to within four inches of the child's neck.

Mr. McCabe in the narrator/stage manager role addresses the audience directly, clarifying a point. "He smashes the ax into the tree. Not on the baby. Into the tree."

Back to the woodcutter's voice. "Now, now what? They're coming for me. I'm dead meat." (I am now part of this audience. I am captivated. Enthralled. Engrossed. So is the cameraman, who has virtually stopped looking for angles and shots and is letting the camera run while he listens.)

The teacher turns to his left and adopts the voice of the woodcutter's wife. She pleads with the invisible woodcutter.

No. The King was sad about doing this. He's not going to come to check you out. We're childless. Let the child stay with us and we will raise the child as our very own. We will not tell anyone. No one comes by here. No one lives near us. If anyone comes by, we'll just say it's our baby. The king is not coming out here, believe me. He's too emotionally upset. He knows you are honest and will do what he told you to do.

A turn back to the right. The woodcutter expresses confusion and dismay. "We can't keep this baby. It's not our child. I do not know what to do."

The schoolroom clock on the wall rings announcing the end of this episode in the story. It is as though the Act I curtain is drawn. Not one student stirs. Not one student glances anxiously at the clock. Not one student begins to pack up his books. Not one. You do not believe me? I have it on videotape, and I have studied the videotape, and I assure you not one student lost his focus on Mr. McCabe and the story of the beginning of the Trojan War. No one moved until Mr. McCabe signaled the end of this episode with, "Get out of here. I'll see you tomorrow."

At the end of our first visit to this middle school, the video cameraman and I say our thanks and goodbyes and chat about the class we had just seen working. As we descend the wide, steep staircase to the main floor, we see a neatly hand-lettered sign in the pane of the fire door. It proclaims Seneca Middle School as a national school of excellence. In contrast, a neighboring suburban school's sign is professionally done with gilt lettering and adorns the front lawn conspicuously. The cameraman comments knowingly, for he has taught middle-school children, "He can't keep that up. You can't just talk to eighth-graders all period." Wrong, Mr. Cameraman. You can indeed, and Mr. McCabe did just that for the four class periods we visited him.

He is a modern-day Homer dramatically retelling the classical myths in eighth-grade idiom, inserting little homilies, and dressing them up with humor for the consumption of the students in front of him. They, for their part, take notes every day. They then take their notes home, and for homework copy them over for neatness, completeness, and accuracy. They have been warned, "Remember, neatness, bulk and quality count." They are instructed to leave the scrap paper at home, I think so that the less diligent cannot copy. They are also warned to be consistent in the attention they give to this ongoing task." If you have not been copying over on a daily or at least a biweekly basis, you better start doing that because you are going to end up with 60 pages of notebook on the last day, saying, 'I got to copy all these notes?!'" Indeed, at the end of the three-week unit some students in previous years, I am told, have turned in 60 pages of notes. Two students I interviewed (who were not the superstars of this class by any means) already have produced 35 or 40 pages halfway through this unit.

My fellow teacher-researchers give voice to some of the questions I have as I watch the tapes and Mr. McCabe. "Do the kids ever read the myths?" "Do they ever ask questions?" "Are there any examples of class discussion?" I wondered, too. Then I told myself that Mr. McCabe is continuing in the oral tradition, retelling the myths that were, of course, originally passed down orally.

We, the cameraman and I, reenter the real world of sunshine outside the building that now feels to me like a darkened theater. The principal waves goodbye to us from the steps that overlook the playground, a mostly stone and dirt arena with an old-fashioned chain-link fence girdling it. A few bikes lean up against the fence, tethered like horses waiting for their young riders. There is no litter blowing up against the fence, no McDonald's bags, no cigarettes, no empty coke bottles. The students seem to play amiably with minimum supervision and no one can be seen sneaking away from the school grounds. It seems to be the kind of "tight ship" that taxpayers and school board members speak of with fondness and longing.

I look around the neighborhood, for I lived near here some 15 or 16 years ago. What used to be the friendly Mom and Pop grocery store is now a tanning salon. Whatever happened to Mr. Rosen? I wonder. The hospital next to the school is all scaffolded up preparing for another addition that seems dangerously close to engulfing the school, emblematic, I suppose, of the changing population of this and other cities. The aging and ailing population is growing; the school-age population is declining. I have heard rumors that the hospital wanted to buy the school, and offered a handsome price. The talk made the community and the teachers of Seneca nervous, even hostile in some cases, since there have been elaborate plans for reorganizing this city school district for two years now to adjust to the changing school population. Consultants have been hired and have offered six alternatives for closing some schools, combining others, bussing children. The superintendent has offered his own plan. Painful and noisy citizens' meetings have been held. It is not clear even at this point which schools will remain open and which will be combined when school opens in the fall.

Change is a key, then. Change and resistance to change. This city has changed, this neighborhood has changed, and this school district has changed. At the same time, citizens, taxpayers, teachers, and students resist change. It is natural, I think, for people and institutions to seek to maintain the status quo.

Let me fill in a little background as I understand it. I am no specialist in urban studies. Nor do I know educational policy making. In fact, I have not been particularly active politically even though both my husband and I have worked in this district, our children went through elementary school here, and I still live and pay taxes here. It seems to me important to understand what goes on outside Mr. McCabe's classroom in order to understand what goes on inside it.

In its heyday in the 1930's, when its major industry was flourishing, the district built school buildings furiously to keep up with demands. When I first came to know it (my husband was hired to teach here in the '50's) it was noted for innovative programs like required foreign language in elementary schools, experiments with teaching art and foreign languages on local television, a prekindergarten program that provided lab experiences for high school students in psychology classes, a technical high school program that fed two local technical colleges of national reputation, a leadership training program for administrators that was modeled after the influential local industry's.

Beginning in the '50's, however, several changes affected this school district. For one, the middle classes began to move to the suburbs, drawing off a significant part of that student population and tax base. In addition, the powerful local industry began to relocate units until today there is only a shell standing like a discarded skin of a snake. Little by little, the school's model programs were hacked away in response to declining tax dollars, declining student enrollment, and declining support from the paternalistic industry.

Mr. McCabe is a figure caught in the middle of all of this change. He is a product of this school district, and in fact, attended Seneca Middle School. He sees the need for change, for reorganization, and suggests that most fair-minded teachers agree. "We do need reorganization." But he has reservations about what the proposed reorganizations (regardless of which of the six or seven proposals one examines) will mean for class size and school size.

> Thirty kids in a classroom is not quality education. I remember back in my high school days when we had a high school that's got 3,000 kids in it. I can remember when your husband was my guidance counselor, we couldn't have our names read at graduation because there were too many kids. I think that's wrong. I think it's a disservice to students.

His attitude seems consistent with that voiced by other teachers, by parents, and by community members who attend meetings and write editorials in the local papers. This community remembers the heyday with fondness, wants to hang on to as much of the old traditions and the old ways of doing things as is possible, but at the same time recognizes reluctantly the need for some sort of change, and argues vociferously about the kind of change that is tolerable.

Change is difficult to tolerate. But I think this city is particularly aware of its traditions and particularly reluctant to let go. I remember there was angry shouting in the press and in the street when the date of the football game between the two city high schools, which has ALWAYS been played on Election Day, was changed.

Now the school district is organized with middle schools, but they seem not to have a real identity. In this middle school, there are sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders. Some of the

middle schools in the district have a different grade configuration from Seneca. The sixth-grade curriculum is governed by the required basal series that is used in elementary school, while the seventh- and eighth-grade curriculum seems geared to prepare students for high school. Lana tells me that the note-taking skills she is learning in her mythology unit are important because "in high school you have to take notes on whatever the teacher says to pass the test. They don't really tell you 'OK you have to write this down.' You have to pick out whatever they say." Probably Lana is more on target than one might suspect. Ann Connolly's colleague said in another report on a teacher that she would like ninth-graders to know how "to be able to sit still for 45 minutes and to take notes on what the teacher tells them." Right on, Lana. You've got the system all figured out.

Mr. McCabe's curriculum seems resistant to change. It feels pretty much as I remember it from many years ago. When I taught in the high school in this district, English was viewed as the sum of its parts: reading, literature, writing, spelling, vocabulary, grammar, speaking, listening. The middle school has latched on to this program. While the suburban schools embrace with enthusiasm each new trend (process writing in the '70's, Madeline Hunter in '85, shared decision making in '86, whole language in '87, the Johnson brothers and cooperative learning this year), the city schools resist the gurus of reform. Is it because they've been doing things their way since before the suburban schools were born? Is there a Maslovian hierarchy of needs for institutions that says that if an institution is struggling with survival and identity, it doesn't look with enthusiasm on "new ideas"?

Lana describes what goes on in her eighth grade. They have read some novels like April Morning and Edgar Allen and The Pearl. They have spelling workbooks, a grammar unit, a writing unit, a play unit, a mythology unit. In the accelerated eighth grade, they do all of this and in addition, under Mr. McCabe's tutelage, put out the yearbook.

Mr. McCabe worried about the "culture shock" of integrating students from another middle school on the other side of town with Seneca.

> Are fast kids at Phillips as fast as fast kids at Seneca? We [Seneca] have the image in the district of being the snobs. I don't know why. I guess because we're a national school of excellence, and we get a lot of publicity, compliments of Will (the principal) and his schemes and things. We have luncheons for high-honor kids which I run and coordinate. We pick them up in a limousine and bring them to school. You know, there's a lot of PR in this building, and I don't know that the Van kids will be able to handle it. I don't know if teachers will be able to find the level where those kids can handle it. We had them come here one day, the seventh and eighth grade classes and it was just like craziness. They were screaming and yelling, running and shouting.

He repeats his fear that there will be culture shock. Interestingly, he used the same term when he referred to his own schooling.

> Yup. I went to Smith first. We left there in fourth grade. My parents bought a home in this neighborhood. We went to Jones which was a real culture shock for me. Yeah. I was an honor student in my fourth grade class at Smith and all of a sudden I was sitting with kids who were sons of doctors and lawyers, kids who wrote with cursive writing on the board. I'd never seen that before. I struggled for a few years and then went to Seneca in '59, graduated from here in '62, graduated from high school in '65.

In addition to worrying about the culture shock of moving kids from one kind of neighborhood to another, he has other concerns about reorganization. He thinks it is being forced on teachers without their full knowledge and consent.

> We hear from central administration, 'Well, we're going to do this, and we're going to make manageable cuts in teachers and we're going to give you all the quality you want.' I don't see it. I don't see any money. We applied for grants to work correlating the curriculum with the Phillips curriculum. We've heard nothing about them. We're having a hassle getting the equipment from Van. No one seems to know even with Board elections tomorrow what's really going on. Decisions will be made on August 29. That's a disservice to students. And that's a disservice to teachers. We've had 24 teacher cuts in the district. That's just the tip of the iceberg. There's going to be 60 or 70 teachers and 10 administrators who are going to go. That's why I believe they're just slashing at will. Very much like they said they were going to do before the strike in '75.

How do teachers react?

> There's a saying that teachers make it or break it. Ultimately good teachers will do what they have to do. If it means staying late, if it means readjusting your curriculum, then you have to do it and you do it. I think that's what they're counting on. These teachers are in a relatively old district and people know they'll do what they have to do. Also it's a relatively stubborn district in the sense that everybody is doing exactly what they're supposed to do, and they aren't going to make any changes. There has to be a blending of those two. We talked about team teaching like [a suburban school nearby]. Then we found out how much it was going to cost, and that you need an extra free period to do it; all of a sudden team teaching was something we'll worry about in '90 or '91.

I wondered what the students thought of the proposed changes. Mr. McCabe said,

> I teach mostly eighth-grade kids. I won't say that they don't care whether this place goes up in flames or not, but their concern is next year. What is the reorganization of high school? What's going to happen when they are a junior or a sophomore? Who's coming to my school?

Lana and Stephen, two students from Mr. McCabe's class, confirmed his opinion when we talked. Lana is a pert girl who wears lots of makeup, has a pixie face, and has highly-styled hair piled on top of her small head. She tells me that once Mr. McCabe teased her for having "$3,000 worth of mousse on her hair." She wants to be a beautician or a fashion designer or a model. Her father and mother went through this school system. She tells me that in her neighborhood "there's my house, then there's my grandparents' house, and my aunt lives next door to me." In contrast to the young sophisticate Lana, Stephen seems small for an eighth-grader. He is blond and compactly built, and sits in the front of the class very attentively. Like Mr. McCabe, he transferred to Seneca from a school reputed to be less ... I don't know, demanding? Prestigious? Less middle class? His grandparents came to this town as newlyweds who could hardly speak English. Now the grandparents have the entire family to their house every Sunday for dinner.

Lana speaks first:

> I don't want to go to Valley High [the proposed new high school on 'the other side of town']. I don't get along with people who go there. I mean, I walked past Valley once and I got jumped by a black girl because her boyfriend looked at me. I mean white people are prejudiced, but black people are just as much prejudiced, but they are against us more than we are against them. You can't even go there. I walked by the school, and I got people pointing at me, girls chasing me, people calling me names. I don't want to be bothered.

Stephen chimes in, "I'm scared to go there 'cause I don't like to fight, and if you go there you have to know how to fight. You have to learn how to protect yourself. One on one. I don't think I can handle that."

So there we have it. An old school district struggling for survival and identity in changing times and at the same time, teachers and students reacting to the changes that seem to come at them from outside of their control. Let's go back into the classroom.

During the next three days of videotaping, it became clear that there is a rhythm to a McCabe class. It has three parts: housekeeping, exhortation, and myth-telling.

The housekeeping section is first and begins as soon as the bell rings for class. Mr. McCabe, who arrives punctually a minute or two before the bell rings, joshes and exchanges good-natured jibes with the principal, strides to the door, and closes it after a glance up and down the hall for stragglers. There are none. He then positions himself at his desk which is in the back of the classrooms behind the six rows of students. He picks up his gradebook from the upper right corner of his desk and begins taking attendance by calling names. Students do not turn around to look at him. They answer. If he says something funny, as he often does, they laugh appropriately, but they do not turn around or poke each other. One day he reminds them of the spelling workbooks that are due. "The following people owe me a spelling book tomorrow. If you don't have anything to hand in, the only grade you can get is nothing."

These workbooks contain a series of spelling units. According to my informant, Lana,

> Every week since about December we had a spelling test every Friday and before we take the spelling test we have to do the unit. Then after we're done with all the units, we hand in the book and we got a grade on the book.

As students hand in their books, Mr. McCabe puts them neatly on a bookcase behind him. I am struck at this point by his good housekeeping. He doesn't have to fumble to find his attendance book (as I often do). He has an empty shelf waiting for the spelling books. His room, in fact, is starkly neat. No posters. No plants. No books spilling over bookcases.

I am also struck by his repeatedly reminding kids what is expected of them. Lana commented on it. "We don't have too much homework. And when we do, we always have enough time to do it. It's not really homework. It's homework you really enjoy doing." Stephen mentioned the weekly schedule of assignments for all the classes that occupies a prominent and permanent place on the front blackboard.

> You are not going to come to school and have a "pop quiz." Or walk into his class and have him say, 'We have homework tonight.' He warns you about things, like, 'Next week you are going to have to do this,' so you get ready for it. He always has a schedule on the board so when you walk into class and look on there and see what you need.

Mr. McCabe will not accept late assignments. According to Stephen, "If you are home sick, no matter what, if you call, he will come to your house to get your homework or report." There is a myth about Mr. McCabe, then. He will fly through the air to your house to pick up your homework.

"Is that the truth?" I ask. " Do you know if he has really done that?" Stephen assures me,

> Yes he has. If you can't make it, if you have choir or something, you have to give someone else your homework. If you don't send it in the very next day, you get a certain amount of points taken off. When he wants it, he wants it. That's it. And if no one brings it in, he will give you a real long lecture: if you don't do homework, you will never pass.

Not only are students clear about daily expectations, but they were able to forecast the entire year for me. Stephen continues: "We know in the beginning of the year what we are going to be doing at the end of the year. We know when we have to study real hard for the finals."

And this is all summed up by Mr. McCabe who told me that students are learning "to do their work."

During the housekeeping part of the class, then, these expectations are announced and reinforced. After the housekeeping portion, Mr. McCabe takes center stage in the front of the classroom, but assumes an informal posture. For example, he may sit on a student desk facing the students and provide the exhortation. In this segment, he seems more like a coach than a raconteur. He gives them what I suspect a pregame pep talk sounds like. "All of my friends have been working real, real hard to do better. But you can't just do better for 10 weeks. You have to do better the whole year." On another occasion, he warns of the horrors of summer school.

> Some of you have been making a real effort this quarter. But you need to make an effort third quarter, you need to make an effort fourth quarter, you need to make an effort on the final exam to pass the course. There is nobody in this class that can tell me honestly that they want to go to summer school. Nobody wants to go to summer school. I teach summer school. It's 95 degrees and you are locked in a room for an hour and a half with no break. I teach summer school. I get paid and I don't want to do it. So don't tell me you want to go.

When he is satisfied that the lesson has been heard, he stands and begins the myth-telling.

During this segment of the lesson, I'd like to focus on five aspects of his delivery: his use of eighth-grade idiom, especially simile; his homilies; his humor; his reminders to "put that in your notes"; and his discipline.

The myth of Paris and the beginning of the Trojan War is made sensible to eighth-graders because Mr. McCabe inserts comparisons and allusions that make sense to eighth-graders. For instance, "Zeus looked like (you got to imagine this) a slimmed-down Kenny Rogers. Kenny has great looks just like Mr. McCabe does. Imagine a skinny Kenny Rogers with that gray hair that probably isn't his own, you know that older kind of good-looking weathered look." Later, "Zeus used to go to Earth and fool around. You know, like boys' night out." Still later, "It was said in the myth that he had built Troy as a summer home for the gods. You know, like the best place to summer is Saratoga or Lake George?" Still later, when the woodcutter is summoned to the King, "It's like when they call you to the office. You go down there and you say, 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean it", and you don't even know what they are going to say. We always assume it's going to be negative."

The homilies that are inserted seem intended to teach moral lessons. For example, students are told that when Priam gave up his son,

> in doing so, he's given up his life. His own love. Put that down. But you say, 'Mr. McCabe, he's still alive.' I say that you are not a mom and you are not a dad. When you give up on your children, finally give up on your children or you lose a child, you lose a part of yourself, your own life.

Family is emphasized in the homilies. For example: "The most important things in our lives have to center around our families." And psychological truths are stressed. For example, Priam's treating the newly-returned Paris with more attentiveness than his sibling Hector is motivated by guilt and can be compared to divorced parents.

> Many of you have divorced parents. I don't want a show of hands or anything, but I know. Maybe your parents try to outdo each other. If one of them takes you to the ball game, the other one says, 'He took you to the ball game? I'll take you to Disney World'. They feel guilty. The kid didn't do anything to cause the breakup.

Mr. McCabe's use of humor keeps the students attentive and plays into his using eighth-grade idiom and allusion to make the myths come alive. The woodcutter is described.

> Now here's this woodcutter. He's watching a little MTV. Of course he's not watching MTV. It's 1,000 B.C. and they didn't have MTV. Maybe cable. No MTV. He's eating a little microwave popcorn. It's 12 o'clock. Someone is knocking at his door and some guys are there and they say, "the king wants to talk to you." This is like someone riding up to my house in the next neighborhood and saying, "President Bush wants to speak to you."

We have noted that Mr. McCabe frequently warns students to "put that in your notes." Sometimes he is indeed emphasizing an important point. When introducing the gods, specifically Hebe, he says, "I don't want to give you the word 'weakest', but I am going to give you a parallel now, and I want you to write it down because I am going to say it a lot of times in the next three weeks. The weakest god, supposedly, by rank, was the Goddess Hebe. Nice lady.

Hebe was like a waitress." Just as often, however, the warning "you can write that down" is to remind them that they are supposed to be writing down, to be taking notes. It's a way of keeping students on task.

Finally, a comment on the way Mr. McCabe handles discipline. Frankly, it hardly comes up. Once, he spoke to the boys next to the window who seemed to be inattentive. "Gentlemen, you are interrupting me, and that's not acceptable." Then he went on immediately with the narrative. Most students were unaware of what happened. On another occasion, when Lana seemed to be looking out of the window, he stopped the class and told her to look out of the window. To do this, she needed to walk across the entire width of the classroom. "Is that your boyfriend, Lana? Is he down there?" To the class, he explained, "I understand hormones." Lana, reseated, looked somewhat embarrassed but not unglued. I asked her if she minded and she said she didn't until she remembered it was on videotape and her younger brother might see it next year. On another occasion, Mr. McCabe snapped his fingers in the direction of a recalcitrant without missing a syllable in the narrative. Discipline problems hardly happen. It is not that these students are afraid. They clearly are not being intimidated into acceptable behavior, but I think I can say that this is the best behaved group of eighth-graders I have ever seen. And I taught eighth grade. They are not the elite goody-goody students either; some of them come from the most severe remedial programs. The principal explained that it was potentially a very difficult class.

The cameraman is wildly enthusiastic as we leave. He has been in lots of classes in our district in his capacity as school photographer, and he says this is as good as it gets. "He's a natural." He feels McCabe should be on educational television. In a way, he is. When he leaves for a field trip next week, he will replay videotapes of last year's mythology unit, and students will not miss a beat.

What's the real Mr. McCabe like inside when he's not on stage? We've noted that he is a product of this district.

> The next stop for me was going to college. I wanted to be a scholarship athlete, but ... I didn't ever think I was going to be a teacher. I never thought I'd make it as a teacher. I never thought I'd graduate from college. I just didn't think I would make it. I was not disciplined as a high school student. You know, I had a low B average. It was all native ability. No study skills at all. The best thing that happened to me was that I went to a Catholic school, and they had limitations on you your freshman year. Study hours. And that's what got me going in the right direction.
>
> The first few years were rocky. I can really sympathize with new teachers. It's a very difficult situation. I had classes that were very low level. That was like another world. After the third year, after I got tenure, the concern of course was the Vietnam War. Was I going to go to war? I was given tenure and that day I lost my 2A deferment. That same day. But I was never called to service.

He works hard, this Mr. McCabe. Not the same kind of hard that we see in Veronica Carter and Kathy Moran in other stories, but he spends "an awful lot of time doing things around school. I coach two sports. I have extra jobs because I have four kids. I tutor Spanish. I was a Spanish major for two years. I've bartended. I've bounced. I'll take any other job you'll give me."

And in fact, I told him about a job opening we would have in our district, brought him the application, and then felt guilty about it. Here I was, a guest in his building, and I was recruiting him! I thought about the ubiquitous principal and explained to him what I had done. But Mr. McCabe did not file the application. Earlier he had told me,

> I've been offered a number of other opportunities to go elsewhere, to teach elsewhere, work as a Jostin's representative, work as a salesman. But somehow, this job keeps calling me. I complain like everybody else about the inadequacies and inequities in the system, but I guess teaching is in my blood. And I don't think I could go any other place.